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AGONY & ECSTASY

"No chess grandmaster is normal; they only differ in the extent of their madness." VICTOR KORCHNOI

CHESS: THE DANGEROUS GAME

Story by JUAN RODRIGUEZ Special to The Gazette

IN A WORLD OF TURMOIL, there's one thing I can count on: the heart-pounding combination of exhilaration and fear whenever I pass the Café Pi, a chess parlour on the Main.

MONTREAL STAR FILE PHOTO

Bobby Fischer plays 40-odd chess fans at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia) in the mid-1960s. Writer Juan Rodriguez was there.

It is a gloriously sunny spring day; a warm breeze caresses me, sidewalk strollers are carefree and smiling, but once again I find myself gazing through the window at the couple of dozen furtive faces inside. I glance at the players nearest the window, checking out body language, then examine the position on the board, trying to quickly suss out who's winning, then back to the faces for clues on swagger or worry, then back to the almighty board with a deep gaze to see whether I could win or defend the position.

Forty years ago, if I wasn't covering some show at night, I would whip through my day's duties in the morning, then around noon ensconce myself at a chess club on rue St-Denis until, too soon, noon had become midnight.

Chess had since left my life but was still lodged in the attic of my mind. I missed the reading and study sharpening up my openings. I missed the cliff-hanging tension and the physical pain of tournament chess (aching back, trembling knees). I missed the post-mortems, the kibitzing, the coffee and Cokes. The thing is, no matter your ranking, from the lowliest patzer to the most brilliant grandmaster, all chess players feel this intensity the same way ...

I missed the all-embracing qualities of the game itself – a mixture of art, science (mathematics, spatial thinking, game-strategy, strategic psychology) and blood sport. The bleeding starts in your mind and leaves your body totally drained. (It's been estimated that grandmasters expend more energy in a five-hour session than footballers playing two back-to-back games.)

If chess is an irresistible mental magnet, perhaps it's because there are more possible moves in a single game than there are electrons. If chess is better than life itself, as Bobby Fischer claimed, it's because all his and excuses for poor performance – so common in life – cannot convincingly enter the infernal realm of those 64 squares. Yet even the great champions have proffered such cockamamie excuses – from psychic death rays to contaminated yogurt – that you might think they were insane. Method in their madness, or vice versa?

"Chess is the blueprint of the human mind," Czech new wave filmmaker Ivan Passer claimed, echoing thousands of commentators. "I would love to make a film about it, but how? There is some secrecy and mystery about the way chess players relate to what's happening on the board. There is some discovery to be made about the way they function in the game and in real life."

Agony and ecstasy: There is no more suffocating a slow death as there is in chess, no more vicious a knockout punch as a sudden unseen sacrifice, no more beautiful a concept than a long-term strategy that inexorably leads to victory.

As Marcel Duchamp, inscrutable priest of Dada and surrealism, said, "Chess has all the beauty of art – and much more. ... I have come to the personal conclusion that while all artists are not chess players, all chess players are artists." (Duchamp once briefly quit the art biz to devote himself full-time to the game; he was a good player, but by no means a great one.)

Siegbert Tarrasch, a 19th-century champion, said: "I have always a slight feeling of pity for the man who has no knowledge of chess, just as I would pity the man who has remained ignorant of love. Chess, like love, like music, has the power to make men happy."

Ultimately, it's as addictive as any drug. Fischer put it more bluntly: "All I want to do, ever, is play chess."

Cafés and clubs like Pi are peopled with players with a lot of time on their hands – the unemployed, young slackers, retirees, European émigrés with a yen for the old country.

Should I go in, I ask myself, knowing that if I do I may never come out?

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"No chess grandmaster is normal; they only differ in the extent of their madness," said former contender Victor Korchnoi, a defector from the old Soviet Union. Former British champion Bill Hartson countered: "Chess doesn't drive people mad. It keeps mad people sane."

The French physician and philosopher Jacques Barbeau Duberg wrote Benjamin Franklin in 1779 that chess "tires the spirit instead of rejuvenating it, (and) shrivels and hardens the soul." H.G. Wells in 1896 called chess a "nameless excrescence upon life. ... It annihilates a man." The protagonist of the Lushin Defence, Vladimir Nabokov's 1930 novel about chess, winds up jumping out of a bathroom window. (Chess lore is filled with spectacular feats of self-destruction.) Albert Einstein: "Chess holds its master in its own bonds, shackling the mind and brain so that the inner freedom of the strongest must suffer."

When Freud was all the rage, the fascination with chess was framed in high-falutin' psycho-babble, i.e. the "compulsive-neurotic" voice of patricide (checkmate the king), penis envy, narcissism, even homosexuality. As David Shenk writes in his fascinating 2006 history, The Immortal Game, "The Freudians, in their misguided fervor and impressive self-regard, established at least one important truth: chess taps into primal forces far beyond our immediate control. Clearly, something profound, thrilling, and even somewhat terrifying takes place on its mental stage."

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Fischer, a child prodigy, remains the most notorious example of chess insanity. His long goodbye began just after he captured the world crown from Boris Spassky in the 1972 "Match of the Century" that riveted the world and gave him, and the game itself, the proverbial 15 minutes of fame in an America that had marginalized the game. The man who appeared on the cover of Life magazine – handsome, broad-shouldered, smiling, dressed smartly in suits custom-made in Argentina – was offered all kinds of commercial possibilities, from Vegas exhibitions to record albums. Yet, inexplicably he threw it all away.

He refused to defend his title against Anatoly Karpov on principal (he wanted rule changes), gave away his prize money to the Church of Christian Science, began a peripatetic life in Yugoslavia, the Philippines, Japan. He resurfaced in Serbia to play a lucrative unofficial rematch with Spassky in 1992 – both players now merely a shadow of their former selves – then disappeared again, his disembodied voice ranting virulent anti-Semitism and overall ugly pensées (he cheered 9/11).

And yet. When Bobby died in 2008, Dick Cavett recalled (in his N.Y. Times blog) the happy time he appeared on his TV talk show. The volume and affection of the online responses was astonishing, testament to his – and the immortal game's – grip on the popular imagination in the 1970s.

I can say that I once played Bobby Fischer. Not a real tournament game, but real enough for an adolescent hopelessly hooked on chess. I was among the 40-odd enthusiasts he played simultaneously at the old Sir George Williams University building (now Concordia) on Drummond St. in the mid-1960s. I was hoping to hang tough for maybe a couple

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MARCEL DUCHAMP

of dozen moves, but he picked me apart. I didn't mind; I was dazzled by his methodical cool. Dressed in a grey summer suit with thin lapels, a white shirt and black tie, his hair neatly trimmed, his face slightly pimpled, he arrived at my board, scanned it for maybe 10 seconds, pushed a piece almost disdainfully, and moved on. No eye contact, total intimidation.

"I like the moment when I break a man's ego," Fischer famously boasted. "I like to see 'em squirm." Garry Kasparov – the highest-rated player in history and a far more balanced, urbane personality who retired from chess to devote himself to political opposition to Vladimir Putin – has said virtually the same thing.

Although Fischer was my hero, I never sought to emulate him over the board. Who on Earth could? Instead, I copied the style of Tigran Petrosian, a.k.a. the "wily Armenian," a former champion (1963-69) who locked up the pieces and put the board in a stranglehold underpinned by a series of pressure points, suffocating his opponent until he made a slight mistake that would result in the loss of a pawn or position, which would be enough to win.

Petrosian was the ultimate inheritor of the "hyper-modern" approach espoused by Aron Nimzowitsch in the 1920s, whereby threat – instead of a roundhouse swing – is enough to make a man crack. As such, Nimzowitsch's philosophy, elucidated in the classic tomes My System and Chess Praxis, was the precursor to Cold War strategy. Little wonder chess is dubbed "the dangerous game."

This outwardly unexciting approach resulted in many draws. Hey, a draw is better than a loss, I figured, and Petrosian's style enabled me to play in the "A" section of open tournaments, their upper tiers crowned by masters and grandmasters, where I aimed for a score of 50 per cent (say, two wins, two losses and four draws in an eight-rounder). Little more than a "patzer," I could at least make far superior opponents sweat a little. At my best I was a pain in the ass to play.

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The rise of powerful computer programs seems to have rendered the Immortal Game, well, merely mortal. As such, Kasparov's matches against IBM's Deep Blue in 1996-97 were as much a watershed moment for chess as the Fischer-Spassky match ("The Brain's Last Stand," heralded Newsweek). As Kasparov recently wrote in the New York Review of Books, a $10 home PC program "will crush most grandmasters." Game over? Not so fast.

Computers embody brute calculating force, but they can't feel for us. Human chess is rife with the human drama (strength and fragility) and, more important, Kasparov says, the capacity for innovation. "I am much more interested in using the chess laboratory to illuminate the workings of the human mind, not the artificial mind." Chess gives rise, and occasional grandeur, to our intuitive and adaptive powers, allowing players to build cathedrals to the sheer beauty – and efficacy – of thought in the moment. Marcel Duchamp said: "I always loved complexity. With chess one creates beautiful problems." If the 20th century is marked by the need "to extract truth and beauty from complexity in one way or another," as Shenk writes, "the ancient game lost no significance as a thought tool. A stream of modern artists, scholars, and scientists leaned on the game to work through problems of their age."

The age of the computer is marked by humankind's dependence on letting it do the work for us, often to astonishing result. Which begs Kasparov's question: "Why waste time and money experimenting with new and innovative ideas when we already know what works? Such thinking would horrify anyone worthy of the name of scientist, but it seems, tragically, to be the norm. Our best minds have gone into financial engineering instead of real engineering, with catastrophic results for both sectors."

Indeed, there is more to modern life than crunching numbers. Kasparov's non-game analysis books – Child of Change (1988), a precocious autobiography, and How Life Imitates Chess: Making the Right Moves, From the Board to the Boardroom (2007), a mix of memoirs and bromides marketed as a business book – go the furthest in positioning chess as an essential, if no less obsessive, part of life. It's a great educational tool for daily life. He sees mankind's progress in a combination of computer crunching and human intuition. (In fact, the Internet has made the ancient game more widespread than ever – up-to-date analysis, midnight blitz games against someone halfway around the globe, amazing, awesome.)

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It was 1971, at the height of chess love (the Fischer effect), when I suffered the loss that terminated my tournament career. It was also the year I discovered a certain illicit controlled substance that I won't describe any further.

The scene was the La Presse International Open Tournament at the Hotel Bonaventure, 11 rounds, many grandmasters, masters and experts, and wannabes like me. Despite my usual night shifts, I couldn't pass up playing in the A section, see if I could just attain my 50-per-cent goal. I was running rugged and I, uh, got myself "up" in the men's room just before sitting down opposite a way higher ranked opponent. I am usually slow to adopt a strategy, but for some reason – heh-heh – I played the hyper-modern opening with amazingly cool dispatch. I pushed my pawns relentlessly to clog the board and create pressure points. I saw ... beautiful patterns! The coup de grâce was supposed to be a little sacrifice that would net me a pawn or two, and bust the game open, and just as I arrived at that very moment ... the "stuff" was wearing off ... and I couldn't ... pull ... the trigger. Soon enough, it was me disintegrating on the board and off.

My opponent and I were in post-mortem mode when the Rev. William Lombardy, a grandmaster who served as Fischer's sole assistant in the 1972 match against Spassky, stopped by and towered over the board: "You should've offered up this pawn, not that one, and then the bishop. It's obvious. I'm sorry, because you played it perfectly right up to then." He paused for effect, then added: "How could you lose?" I was crushed. I went on to drop four in a row, regained my balance, had a chance to squeak out a .500 result but, exhausted, failed miserably: 4.5 out of a possible 11. Fini. No mas.

Now, 37 years later, I'm ensconced in Café Pi. I'm rusty; make stupid mistakes, often resigning early – no blesse oblige requires that you shouldn't drag out a hopeless cause – so I can restart another game. With each game, I feel my affinity for chess – no more than an amateur's delight – gradually returning. A couple of hours pass by like minutes – all I want to do, ever, is play chess. The dangerous game is back in my life. I look outside, the sun more brilliant than ever, and I realize it's time to enjoy that, too.

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